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The Quarterly

Slow journalism for people who notice.

LEAD ESSAY · 6,400 WORDS

What we lost when we stopped writing letters

An argument, in the end, against the convenience of the inbox — and for the long, slow patience of a stamp.

The letter, as a form, asks something of us that the email never does — that we sit still long enough to see the room we are in. We do not begin a letter when the spirit moves; we begin one because we have set aside the morning. And it is in that quiet half-hour, before the salutation, that the letter does its first useful work. It makes us put a name to the person we are writing to.

None of this is true of an email. The email comes to us already half-finished, the address auto-completed, the subject line gestured at, the salutation often dropped entirely. We are not asked to slow down. We are not asked to remember.

What changed, I think, was not the speed of the medium but the company we kept inside our heads while writing. The letter was a private place. The email never has been.

> *"We do not begin a letter when the spirit moves; we begin one because we have set aside the morning."*

In a letter, the gap between sending and receiving is part of the argument. By the time it arrives, the writer has had a week to wonder what they actually meant. The reader has time to weigh it.

What I am proposing is not nostalgia, but a recovery of what the letter once made automatic.

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

The reading pile
Six books on attention, by Ada Calhoun.

On craft
A printer returns to handset type, in Marfa.

The interview
Yusef Komunyakaa on revision and silence.

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